THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

A New Greatness

October 19, 1997
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No revolution will come in time to alter this man's life except the one surprise of being loved.... He has only twelve more hours to live.... Over this dead loss to society you pour your precious ointment, wash the feet that will not walk tomorrow.

Mother Teresa, Mary Magdalene, your love is dangerous, your levity would contradict our local gravity. But if love cannot do it, then I see no future for this dying man or me. So blow the world to glory, crack the clock. Let love be dangerous.

Sydney Carter, from "Mother Teresa"
A Book of Faith

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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A NEW GREATNESS

"whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant ..."
Mark 10:43

The best line in an American motion picture this past year was in "Jerry McGuire," when an aspiring professional athlete bellows to his hassled agent, "Show me the money!" I was on an airplane, having exhausted all the reading material in my briefcase and the seat back compartment, including evacuation instructions in case of an unscheduled water landing, so I turned to the movie. "Show me the money!" I loved it. I took out my notebook and wrote. "October 19. Stewardship Sunday. Show me the money!"

The fact is, we don't say it that directly here, in church. The fact is, we will go to great lengths not to say it that directly. The fact is, we have a whole ecclesiastical vocabulary of euphemisms to avoid saying it directly.

Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow observed recently that while modern Americans are quite willing apparently to talk openly about the details of their sex lives, their bodily ailments, even their own deaths, when it comes to their money, a protective "cloud of secrecy" descends on the conversation.

Ministers generally don't like to preach about money, will do anything to avoid asking for it, will sometimes act as if we don't understand it or care about it.

There is, however, a growing literature which is taking us to task for our shyness about money. Presbyterian theologian Robert Wood Lynn went from teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City to the Lilly Endowment as director of the division which deals with and makes grants to religious institutions and causes. Lynn discovered that in that world, religion was ill-informed, unsophisticated and falling far behind everybody else in our culture. And so, after retiring from Lilly, he is now focusing his considerable abilities on helping churches and church people think and talk creatively and intelligently and intelligibly about money. Lynn and Wuthnow plead with us to stop using euphemisms and simply say it.

When the old European churches re-invented themselves in this new world with its commitment to non-established religion, which meant the state would not fund religion from tax revenues, they had a problem: how to pay the bills. Lynn suggests that one of the most efficient ideas the church came up with was pew rentals. In a market economy, why not sell seats in church? The best seats go for the highest price, cheap seats in the back, one of the results of which was that the paying customers, the wealthier members of the parish, were front and center. It helped the church avoid talking about money, he concludes.

In our recent sanctuary renovation project, someone came up with a variation on the old theme which had us in stitches. Mr. McCaskey was in the newspapers, arguing that sky boxes are the key to a successful football franchise. So while we're renovating, someone suggested, why not

build sky boxes all around our balconies? They could have comfortable, swivel seats, discreet access for late arrivals or early departures, piped-in sound and TV for close-ups, and best of all, juice, coffee, bagels and cream cheese.

Now the problem with all of this is that our money, how we earn it and how we use it, is very close to the heart of each one of us and reflects our own sense of ourselves, our expression of the purpose and meaning of our lives. The market knows that about us. We buy our clothes, automobiles, wrist watches and scotch to make a statement about who we are. And, how we use our money finally reflects our own singular truth, our own singular love.

Robert Wuthnow scolds ministers, not so much because in our avoidance of the topic we aren't efficient money-raisers, but because we are not speaking to challenging and helping our people with one of the most important areas of their lives.

So – this is Stewardship Sunday, the day when we hope to persuade one another to give enough money to pay all the bills next year and maybe even allow a few of our programs to grow. We have, for instance, made a new commitment to Christian education and youth ministry reflected in two part-time positions becoming full-time associate pastors and we are looking for those two new people now. We are, for instance, continuing to expand our commitment to our neighbors and their children in educational outreach in a new scholarship program and in tuition supplementation in our Day Care Center. We hope to do more in Guatemala next year, and Cabrini. So yes, we need money. I invite you to give because this institution needs help – but also because I know that you and I need to give, need to use our resources intentionally and faithfully, for the health of our own spirits.

And that, finally, brings us to the text for the day, Mark 10:32-45.

> *"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant."*

One of the most amazing and successful missionary endeavors in the history of Christianity is the story of the Presbyterian Church in Korea. Presbyterian presence in Korea today is about the equivalent of the Roman Catholic Church's presence in our culture. It is huge. There are large Presbyterian churches in every city and village. Some of the biggest churches in Seoul have 30,000, 40,000, 50,000 members. There are wonderful Presbyterian universities, hospitals, secondary schools and welfare agencies. Every Presbyterian Church in Korea has on its steeple a red neon cross, and at night, approaching a city or looking out a hotel window, one sees many red crosses in the night sky, an affirmation of the presence of the church and the gospel.

It began in 1884, when two missionaries, a Methodist and his wife, and a Presbyterian doctor by the name of Alan Underwood, arrived from Tokyo. Korean Methodists and Presbyterians argue about who arrived first. The Methodists claim that since Underwood was a Presbyterian and thus a gentleman, he must have deferred to the Methodist missionary's wife and allowed her to get off the boat first. Presbyterians remind the Methodists that their man was called back to Tokyo, so Underwood, who walked all the way to Seoul, was the first Protestant.

When Presbyterians visit Korea, they always ask, "How did it happen? Why is Christianity so successful here? What are you doing that we aren't doing?" We asked those questions to Dong Ik Kim, pastor of the oldest Presbyterian Church, Underwood's church, Sae-Moon-An, and he told us that there were four periods of dramatic growth, each with a particular story.

Soon after Underwood arrived, Severance Presbyterian Hospital was founded and began delivering western health care in Seoul. And then, in 1890 there was an enormous cholera epidemic. Fifty thousand Koreans died, many of them simply abandoned in the streets because of the absence of health care facilities. Christians, Presbyterian members of that congregation, Sae-Moon-An Church, went into the streets and picked up the sick and dying and took them to the hospital or ministered to them. And the government wondered and inquired, "Who are these people who care for the dying? Why do they do this?" The government, in the midst of the 1890 cholera epidemic, began referring to Christians as the "angels."

In 1910 the Japanese invaded and occupied Korea and the Presbyterian Church was involved in a huge public protest. Later, when the Japanese ruled that all public meetings, including Christian worship, must begin with a Shinto ceremony, Presbyterian pastors were imprisoned and executed for refusing; the church added 200,000 members.

In 1950 when the armies of the north invaded and the church provided social services and food and shelter, its membership doubled again.

And in 1980 in the midst of a military dictatorship when the church once again stood with the people and Presbyterian leaders were publicly reprimanded and imprisoned, the church grew rapidly.

There is, apparently, a connection between the greatness of the Presbyterian Church in Korea and its willingness to serve its country, its people, with courage and determination, which is exactly what Jesus told his disciples one day. It's an almost embarrassingly human and contemporary story and an occasion of one of the clearest articulations of the essence of Jesus' own faith.

They're on the road to Jerusalem. Three times he has tried to warn them that there will be suffering and persecution and quite possibly death when they arrive in Jerusalem. His friends are amazed and afraid, as well they should be. And it's precisely at this moment that James and John, two of his dearest and closest friends, come to him and rather than standing with him in his hour of trial, trying somehow to encourage and support him as he walks toward his own hour of truth which he knows will be his hour of death, instead of compassion and kindness and elemental human decency, they use the moment to ask for a favor.

They still think this is going to come out all right. They still think his arrival in Jerusalem will result in something good – like his becoming the king, the leader, number one in Israel. And when it happens, whatever it is, they, James and John, would very much like to be at his right hand and left hand in positions of power and prestige and visible greatness.

It had to have been one of the most devastating experiences in his life. Where have they been? Haven't they seen and heard a thing? Did they completely miss the point when he put the little child in their midst, or told the rich man to sell his possessions? Were they deaf and blind?

It's so embarrassing that Matthew softens it a bit for us by having their mother ask the question. But Mark writes first and so it must have been James and John who ask it. Jesus does not scold them. In fact, there is a very interesting sense in which he accepts and even affirms their question and what lies behind it – their ambition, their desire for greatness.

They simply have the definitions wrong. It's all right to want to be great. But greatness is not what you think. It's not about sitting at the right and left hand of the king. It's not about having lots of money or even lots of professional success. In God's kingdom, which Jesus believes is now the operational reality in the world, greatness is measured by service. "Whoever wants to be great must be the servant of all."

That's a bit of a jolt, isn't it? In an obvious way it challenges a basic, foundational rubric of the culture in which you and I live and work and earn and spend. Greatness is bigness. Greatness is political power, corporate success, a big salary, a big batting average. It shapes the way we think and live. It results in our brightest and best no longer going into teaching, social work, ministry: even law and medicine are beginning to notice and feel it. Our best today are in business, economics, management. The text challenges the culture to find ways to heal itself: not that business schools shouldn't have bright students, but we must find a way to celebrate the teacher, for instance; the young woman or man who consciously chooses to limit her or his financial future in order to teach children. Or the social worker, or police officer, or the nurse or physical therapist. Jesus would call them great. Or – and this is the critical point – the man or woman who has achieved a measure of this world's greatness with its rewards, and then finds a way to invest it, give it, use it for the service of one's fellow human beings.

And the text is a jolt to the way we think theologically. Lamar Williamson puts it beautifully. The text challenges "any simplistic, self-centered understanding of discipleship. Discipleship will mean more trouble, not less … Jesus is likely to be disruptive." The text digs into our religious notions and suggests, not too subtly, that if personal salvation and its benefits in a life of assurance and an eternity in heaven is why we are following Jesus, we, too, have missed the point. [*Interpretation, Mark*, p. 195]

It means that at a basic level, religious institutions are great, not because of their beautiful architecture, or robust budgets, or growing membership roles, but because of the service they provide to their neighbors, the world, their communities, the needy all around them. It means that the purpose of the endeavor is not merely to assure us that we are the objects of God's unconditional love, but to teach us to live our lives fully by expressing that same love to others.

It means that the purpose for the whole enterprise: your being here this morning instead of somewhere else; this church being here instead of Nordstrom's Department Store – is to express and advocate for greatness – a new greatness based not on wealth, power, success, bottom line, influence, but very simply, on the people who are served, helped, loved, affirmed.

When Mother Teresa died, I went to my shelves to find and reread a little book entitled *Something Beautiful for God.* It's about Mother Teresa and it was written by Malcolm Muggeridge, British journalist, intellectual gadfly and long time editor of *Punch* Magazine. Muggeridge was sent to Calcutta in 1971 by the BBC to do a TV special on an Albanian nun whose ministry was picking up the wretched dying from the streets of the city and taking care of them in the hospice she had established.

Muggeridge, a skeptic theologically who had very little good to say about religion generally, was swept off his feet. He observed the simple rituals of the Sisters of Charity which Mother Teresa founded and headed: how, after morning prayers they went to work on the streets and in their orphanage and hospice. He listened in awe as she told about her simple purpose, to "bring the dying within view of a loving face." Muggeridge chuckled as she told him that the Indian government had given her a free rail pass but what she really wanted was a free airline pass to visit her many convents. When she was refused, she offered to work as an airline stewardess in exchange for one – a prospect Muggeridge called "delectable."

Muggeridge observed how effectively Mother Teresa communicated the claims of Christians without preaching: that people know and understand the truth by seeing it lived, in the same way, apparently, that crowds of people were enchanted by Jesus because what he said and did was not austere, rigid, judgmental religion, but love lived out by accepting, affirming, touching, and loving all who came within its magnetic pull.

And Muggeridge observed one thing more – her joyfulness, her happiness, in the midst of what for any of us would be unimaginable austerity, poverty, filth, stench, uninterrupted suffering – a community of remarkably and profoundly joyful women who actually enjoyed their work.

When she died the whole world paused and, I believe, took stock for a moment. And in the midst of the state military funeral India provided, we saw with momentary clarity the truth that Jesus taught and that Jesus was – namely that true greatness is in becoming a servant.

This incident concludes with Jesus reflecting out loud on his own life. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus forever changed, in that one sentence, the way we think about God and religion. It is the nature of God to serve, to give, to empty self for others.

That was so radical, his contemporaries could barely hear it. They believed God was most like a holy judge whose concerns for the human race were to make sure the law was obeyed and standards of purity and cleanness were maintained. Their religion was a system by which God's holiness and human purity were celebrated and protected.

And here is this man, this unforgettable man, with his radical ideas that God is far more concerned about compassion and service than about ritual purity and religious power and prestige. And then he goes about living it – healing, accepting, reaching out, welcoming the children, the old ones,

the sick and lame and blind and diseased, smashing the barriers and boundaries by touching the unclean, the taboo, the socially rejected – and keeps on living it on the road and then dramatically in the heart of his nation – his people, and then incredibly, keeps pouring himself out, until on a Friday afternoon he dies, so that a few years later one of his followers will write

> *"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*
> *Who emptied himself taking the form of a slave."*

"Let the same mind be in you." That's you and me – loved by the Lord, ransomed, set free from whatever about us or about our world inhibits us, restrains us, chains us to lesser goals and aspirations and challenges us to become great men and women.

Who, in our better moments, God-given moments, knows that it is in service to others, to our children, our parents, our spouses, our neighbors, to those who need our love, our strength, our help; that it is in emptying ourselves that we become ourselves, that in our service is our true and only greatness.

Malcolm Muggeridge tells an entrancing, fascinating story of filming Mother Teresa in her convent. It was in the late afternoon. The cameraman insisted that it was too dark to film. A heated discussion ensued. Muggeridge convinced him to give it a try even though everyone knew there simply wasn't enough light. When the film was processed, Mother Teresa and her convent were "bathed in a particularly beautiful soft light, like the kindly light in the old hymn." "This love is luminous," he wrote, "like the haloes artists have seen and made visible around the heads of the saints." [p. 44]

Well, maybe. But what I know is true, with everything in me, is that God is love and God's will for you and me is that we know that love and live out the rest of our days rejoicing in that love and sharing it, passing it around, among those who need it – and in the process discovering that we are having a great time, that we are doing great things, that we have become, because he said, great in our service, great in our love, great in our generosity.

* * *

O God, continue to startle us out of our spiritual lethargy with the truth that you are a God of mercy and love, and that you empty yourself for us, and that Jesus poured out his life for us, and that the greatest thing any of us can do is to be like him.

Amen.